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STUDENTS AND STAFF AS PARTNERS IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: INTRODUCING OUR STORIES OF PARTNERSHIP

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If you asked ten Australians to explain ‘students as partners,’ I have no doubt you would get ten different answers because the language of students as partners is new for us. The idea—learners and teachers grappling together about curriculum, assessment, learning, teaching through dialogue predicated on trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility for shaping higher education—is gaining traction across the Australian higher education sector. In 2016, the nationally funded Transforming Practice Program (adapted from the United Kingdom Change Academy) centered on students as partners and supported eleven institutions as they worked to implement partnership initiatives. In 2015, I was awarded a nationally funded Australian Learning and Teaching Fellowship on engaging students as partners. This enabled me to thread together a network of over 400 students, staff and academics (faculty) across the country working in this space or seeking to understand the possibilities of partnership.

Enacting Students as Partners in Australia: Embracing the Unpredictable

Interest in students as partners has emerged from broader questions about the position of students in Australian universities with much focus on ‘listening to the student voice’ and ‘student representation in institutional governance.’ The Australian sector has a strong record of gathering student feedback via a range of survey instruments. However, we are struggling to figure out how to engage students more meaningfully in teaching and learning efforts that extend beyond data collection or inviting students to serve on institutional committees. Both are sensible activities but neither is sufficient if we, in Australia, are genuinely serious about engaging students as partners in ways that allow students and staff to shape the university learning experience together. Over the past year of my Fellowship activities, I have noted several tensions around students as partners in our Australian universities:

1. Struggle in shifting from what university staff ‘do to’ and ‘do for’ students toward imagining what students and staff can ‘do together.’
2. Discomfort about questioning and re-imagining the assumed role and implicit identity of what it means to be the ‘learner’ and the ‘lecturer.’
3. Confounding of ‘student representation’ and ‘student feedback’ to achieve institutional/instructor-derived goals with ‘students and staff as partners’ working together to realize shared educational goals.
4. Over enthusiasm to push all students and all staff toward partnership versus skepticism about partnership practices engaging the already engaged.
5. Challenge of balancing pragmatic interests of those wanting to know ‘how do it’ with others seeking space ‘to make sense of what partnership means.’

All these are legitimate tensions that deserve our attention and thoughtful consideration. Over the course of my Fellowship I have become comfortable with these tensions. Enacting students as partners is messy, tensions will always be manifold, and the outcomes of students and staff genuinely working together with a shared sense of responsibility for learning and teaching in higher education will be uncertain and unpredictable. Partnership requires creativity from both students and staff as part of a complex social learning process—learning at the deepest levels that seeks to transform how we see ourselves in the world that extends

far beyond knowledge acquisition and pre-defined, measureable learning outcomes. Universities should be spaces that strive for the type of learning that transform our identities and beliefs in ways we cannot predict.

We are at the beginning of our journey in Australia as we collectively work to make sense of and debate students as partners. Connecting with thoughtful international colleagues has opened up new insights into the direction students as partners could travel here in Australia. Importantly, the Fellowship community has given many of us in Australian higher education permission to think beyond our traditional 'students,' 'staff,' and 'academic' identities to imagine different ways of learning and teaching in our universities as part of a network of like-minded peers. The essays in this special issue feature just a handful of the creative and diverse practices currently unfolding across Australian universities.

Eight Australian Stories of Partnership

[*Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education \(TLTHE\)*](#) is a space that privileges the lived experiences of collaborating in partnership through personal story-telling and deep reflection to illuminate the messiness of the partnership process. Thus, *TLTHE* is an ideal space to tell our stories and share what they mean to us in hopes of legitimatizing partnership as core university work while offering realistic tales of the pleasures and pains of partnership as a process of shared engagement. Importantly, *TLTHE* connects us further to our colleagues overseas.

The selected eight essays in this special issue signal the variety of approaches to partnership in Australia: range of practices (co-teaching, co-inquiring, co-facilitating, co-designing); disciplines (arts, engineering, education, health, history, psychology, social sciences, and cross-disciplinary); and levels (classroom, degree program, institutional, and across institutions). Two of the essays highlight practices over the space of years ([Cunningham](#); [Miles & Power](#)) while others explore newer partnership in their infancy ([Obenhollenzer & Brady](#); [Taylor & Quick](#)). This temporal dimension highlights that while the language of students as partners is new, such practices have been occurring in Australia for some time. However, the recent emergence of the partnership language has created space for many new practices.

The essays in this special issue reveal a diversity of lived experiences and reflective insights with fruitful implications for others engaging in, or considering, partnership. [Miles and Power](#) share their journeys from being students engaged in partnership to being academics engaged in partnership. In contrast, [Cunningham](#) reflects on being a student with a strong desire to support his peers who makes a brave decision to seek out academic partnership with personally transformative outcomes. [Taylor and Quick](#) share their story of a new partnership blossoming around a mutual aspiration to support student learning. [Browne and colleagues](#) grapple with initiating new partnership practices in a large subject in a scalable way, revealing tensions and contradictions in their experiences. Also attempting a new partnership model to negotiate class curriculum, [Monsen, Cook, and Hammant](#) describe the anxiety and awe of sharing responsibility for the class curriculum. [Obenhollenzer and Brady](#) reflect on their new partnership framed within a short-term funded project designed to understand student retention and employability in the Arts and Social Sciences. [Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Groenendijk, and Matthews \(me\)](#) question the role of identity, conflict, and leadership in our partnership practice of co-facilitating international workshops together.

Also raising questions, [Bell and partners](#) discuss their partnership project on cultural competence and wonder how to scale-up involvement in ways that engage more than the ‘already engaged,’ high-achieving students. All these essays present real issues facing those of us in Australia as we enact partnership practices, and reminds us of the importance of networks to support such uncertain and creative work that does not come with a step-by-step ‘how-to’ guide.

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